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ABSTRACT

An educational publisher poses several questions that are related to accountability for the purpose of stimulating discussion on this topic at a national convention of social studies teachers. Is it appropriate to insist upon the verification or validation of instructional materials? Is it possible to make more money available for the purchase of instructional materials? Will schools ever share with publishers control over items such as pupil assignment, teacher assignment, or time allocation? Are educators responsible in any way for the behavior of their students in society? What responsibility should social studies educators, in particular, assume for producing citizens who will model society? How does this affect the agenda of future concerns and activities in social studies education? (Author/KSM)

SOME QUESTIONS ON ACCOUNTABILITY

by Robert J. R. Follett  
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23 November 1973

(This is the print version of a talk given at the NCSS convention in San Francisco by Mr. Follett. The purpose of the talk was to stimulate discussion rather than present a position. After the talk, more than eighty participants in the session engaged in lively discussions which lasted until well after the official ending hour.)

My role is to be provocative. I am to stimulate a lively and productive discussion session. To provoke and stimulate, I will pose questions. There are no definitive answers for these questions and I don't suppose that we will soon arrive at definitive answers. Nonetheless, I believe the questions are important and worth discussing.

We are going to talk about accountability. Let's try to define that term. To be accountable, in my mind, is to accept responsibility for accomplishing defined objectives through the application of available resources. If you are the coach of a football team, you have available the men on the team, their equipment, and facilities. The objective is winning football games. If you use the resources and fail to achieve the objective, you are quite likely to be fired. It usually does no good to complain that you have poor players, or that injuries hampered you. These are mitigating circumstances but they do not lessen accountability.

In a business, the chief executive has personnel and money which he is to use to make the investors in the business a return on their investment at least as good as they could get by putting their money into a savings account or government bonds. Government bonds have paid as high as 9% this year. The average educational publisher produced an after-tax profit of three percent of sales. It is predictable that a significant number of chief executives of educational publishing companies were fired during the past couple of years. At last count, I had the number as twenty-four.

In education, society provides educators with resources — teachers and supporting staff, classrooms and other facilities, instructional materials, and so forth, purchased with large amounts of taxpayer's money. Society's objective is to educate its children. Somebody, somewhere, ought to be responsible -- accountable -- for producing the desired objective with those resources.

But, what is the objective? What does it mean to be educated? Anyway, you may say, there aren't enough resources provided and the school only has the child for a few hours a day. And, we are educating millions of children and doing a darn good job of it.

That's all true. But somewhere in your city, in my city, in most cities, there is an eighteen-year-old boy. This boy dropped out of school after ten years. He reads at the fourth grade level. He has never held a steady job. He is the father of an

illegitimate child who collects ADC. He has vandalized neighborhood schools and parks, is into petty thievery, and uses drugs and alcohol in excessive quantities. His future is dismal. He is a front-line soldier in an army that has turned many communities into zones of terror. He and his fellows have made crime in the streets a basic gut issue of politics.

We gave this boy ten years of schooling. We spent more than \$10,000 on his education before he dropped out. We put him in the hands of professionals certified as capable of educating him. We gave him instructional materials which the advertising claimed would teach him and motivate him. We invested ten years and \$10,000 so that he would become a literate citizen, productive worker, and capable parent. He is none of these things. Instead, he has become a threat to society, a social problem that will demand a great deal more investment in crime prevention, welfare, medical care, and other costly social services to aid him or protect society from him. Society says someone ought to be responsible for this failure. Someone ought to be accountable. Perhaps this boy is a failure of our social system, of our economic system, or of our political system. Perhaps his heredity is bad. But at this time, more and more citizens are placing the blame for this kind of social failure upon the educational system.

That's what accountability is really all about.

In the past, schools were seldom held responsible for failure. The drop-out, or push-out, was seen as the unfortunate product of a bad home, a bad neighborhood, or other bad influences for which the schools were not responsible. Those who remained in the schools quickly accepted the dominant middle-class ethic and value system. The schools were deemed by their patrons to be successful in the enculturation process that the patrons desired and the issue of accountability was never raised.

But, after more than a decade of social unrest and upheaval, school patrons are no longer as willing to accept that the schools are successful. Thus they demand accountability.

There is another item fueling the demands for accountability. In twenty years, the cost of educating a student has gone up 300 percent, in constant dollars. Let me repeat that. It costs three times as much today to educate a student as it did twenty years ago, even when the effect of inflation are totally discounted.

Schools took ever more resources, at the same time that society began to doubt the ability of schools to meet educational objectives. Some educators claim that schools are doing a much better job today than they were twenty years ago. Even the most sanguine educator could hardly claim that schools are doing a 300% better job. It is the perception of the average citizen that schools are doing no better today than they were twenty years ago. And the average citizen is much more aware of the great cost of education and its failures than he was in the past. Accountability is the banner under which citizens are beginning to question the performance and the cost of their schools. To be accountable in education is to be held responsible for producing the results that society desires with the resources provided by society.

In the social studies, that presents some problems. Many educators know exactly what social studies education should be accountable for. They have a wide range of objectives, many behaviorally-stated, dealing with the knowledge and skills appropriate to the social sciences. The anthropologists, economists, historians, geographers, and

other social scientists who have led curriculum reforms want the social studies to be accountable for producing students knowledgeable about, skillful in, and oriented toward the social science disciplines. These are things of great importance to the academic disciplines, but quite frankly, of little or no interest to society in general.

The social studies, in particular, is out of tune with society when it comes to accountability. Society wants its schools to produce boys and girls who are good citizens, able to live effectively and productively in the society, and in harmony with its dominant values.

Society is not in the least convinced that a social studies program that helps boys and girls to learn the basic concepts and inquiry modes of the social sciences will have any impact upon cutting down on crime in the streets, eliminating corrupt politicians, solving the energy crisis, or reducing the price of food. You and I have a somewhat different belief or we wouldn't be social studies educators. But, even those of us who have been involved with social studies for most of our adult lives, cannot be entirely free of the suspicion that our subject area has failed to be relevant to the overwhelming social, political, economic, and moral crises that have flayed our nation. You may be sure that the average citizen has a great deal of suspicion.

One can answer those suspicions by pointing out that no one really knows what kinds of educational experiences will produce good citizens and that, in any case, teaching good citizenship in a classroom for forty minutes a day, 200 days a year, can hardly overcome all of the other influences to which the student is subject. One can answer that, but such an answer will not satisfy. To the extent that society is not satisfied, to that extent it demands accountability.

It seems to me that there are two basic strategies which might be followed to deal with such a situation. One is to work very hard to convince society that schools are powerless to do anything in any meaningful way to cope with overwhelming social problems, and therefore, schools should not be held to account. This strategy has a pitfall. If one admits, in effect, that schools are irrelevant to the basic needs and demands of society then it is hard to justify expending over 60 billion dollars a year on schools.

The other strategy is to accept the challenge of accountability as defined by society and attempt to structure the school program so as to meet the challenge. It seems to me that this is the only practical approach.

In broad general terms, education is accountable for turning children into the kind of young adults that society demands. It will be necessary to determine more carefully what kind of young adults it is that society expects us to produce. We must attempt to define the educated person in an operational way so that we can devise a curriculum and organize our educational resources to turn out educated persons.

Let me close this section by challenging you. What kind of social studies curriculum is needed by a society afflicted by Watergate, Viet Nam, drug addiction, poverty, crime, vandalism, and violence? Is the conventional wisdom, accepted by a majority of the members of NCSS, about what a desirable course of study in social studies ought to

be, really wisdom? Or is it just conventional? If we accept the challenge of accountability for that area of the educational process for which we are responsible, what changes are we going to have to make?

Do social studies educators bear any portion of responsibility for My Lai? For Watergate? These incidents are not the work of a single madman. They are episodes involving many hundreds of people who participated in the activities which led up to the specific incident, who took part in the incident itself, or who were active in the subsequent attempts to bury it from public view. And there are thousands upon thousands more who do not accept these incidents as tragedies, who do not feel any moral guilt should be associated with the acts committed at My Lai or Watergate; thousands upon thousands who believe that their government is justified in taking these actions and even bloodier and more reprehensible ones in the name of national security, whatever that is.

Those many hundreds who directly participated in these incidents were educated in American schools. Perhaps you, yourself, had one of these people in your classroom. Perhaps you published the instructional materials they used. Certainly we have all had a part in educating some of the thousands upon thousands who see no wrong in these incidents. Are we responsible? Can we be held accountable in any way for an education that permits burglary, obstruction of justice, and murder to seem justified?

If we, as educators, are not accountable for this then what are we accountable for? Or is our real role in society to provide baby-sitting services for children, keeping them off the streets and occupied in harmless ways for several hours a day?

If education is our role, are we not accountable? And if we are accountable, then are we not accountable for providing an education that helps boys and girls become good citizens who know right from wrong, who can recognize crimes and criminals for what they are?

And if we are accountable, let us ask how we can devise social studies programs that will accomplish the objectives that are demanded by society. Can we build a social studies program that will inoculate our citizens against future My Lais and future Watergates? To me, this is the paramount issue of accountability. Most of the rest of what is discussed under the heading of accountability is rubbish or mere rhetoric.

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I would like to now turn to some issues of considerably less cosmic importance. They are other aspects of accountability which ought to be considered.

First, I would like to put the matter of accountability as it relates to publishers into perspective. Previously, I referred to the hypothetical drop-out whose education cost \$10,000. Where was the \$10,000 spent?

About \$7,000 or 70% went to pay for his teachers. Another \$1,000 or 10% went to pay for administrative and support services. About \$600 went for the custodians who cleaned the classrooms and fired the boilers. Less than \$100 went to publishers to pay for the basic instructional materials used for ten years. That's less than 1%. Those numbers should clearly establish the level of the publisher's accountability.

But that's not all. Not only did the publisher receive a miniscule portion of the budget but, in addition, he had absolutely no control over the primary variables affecting use of his materials. He did not control the assignment of students. He did not control the assignment of teachers, the methodology used, or the time allotment made. He did not control the assignment of the physical facilities, nor the relationship between different areas of the curriculum. Over practically every one of the significant educational variables, the publisher had no control whatsoever.

Publishers usually design their materials to be most successful with children having specific constellations of learning characteristics. Learning efficiency would be greatly enhanced if the materials were assigned to the children for whom they were most suitable.

Publishers also design their materials for use with certain kinds of teaching methodologies and styles. Successful use of published materials would be greatly enhanced if the teachers were matched to the materials.

Publishers design their materials for a specific time allocation. If it takes 30 minutes a day to do an effective job, then it will be difficult to do the job with only ten minutes a day or an hour two days a week.

Publishers design their materials for use in certain types of facilities. It does no good to prepare films, for example, if the classroom has no window coverings or if the projector is broken and can't be operated by anyone in the school.

The efficient and effective use of publishers' materials would be greatly enhanced if schools would be willing to match the materials to the specific characteristics of the learning process, including the students, teacher, facilities, time allotment, and so forth. This means that publishers would, in fact, begin to have some control over these things.

Is it possible that schools will ever be willing to share power over these items in any meaningful way? If so, then publishers will clearly become accountable in a way which they can never be now. If schools do not make serious efforts to match students, teachers, and other factors to the learning materials, there is no sensible or reasonable way to hold publishers accountable. This basic issue of authority cannot be separated from accountability.

Is there any practical way in the real world that spending for instructional materials might be increased to a level where publishers could be held to greater account? The National Education Association, in the publication, Selecting Instructional Materials for Purchase, recommended that 5% of the school operating budget be allocated to instructional materials. This five percent includes supplementary and library materials as well as basic instructional materials. To achieve the five percent level would require doubling the current expenditures on these items. Naturally, all publishers are wholeheartedly in favor of the five percent standard. We believe that such a level of spending would greatly improve education. And there is beginning to be some evidence pointing in that direction. But where would the increase in spending come from in an era when total spending on education is quite unlikely to rise except as a consequence of inflation? Where would the increase in spending come from in a time of militant



unions and resistant taxpayers? To be held accountable, the publishers will have to get a greater share of the educational budget. Is this likely to happen? If so, where will the money come from? And who will determine how it is to be spent -- Teachers? Administrators? Citizens?

At the present time, the publisher is really able to be accountable for one thing only -- that is for providing materials that appeal to the persons who make the buying decision. A successful publisher (not necessarily a good publisher) has only to publish materials that adopting groups like. The company need not publish materials that all teachers like. It need not publish materials that help children learn better. It need not publish materials that satisfy parents or the community. It need only publish materials that an adopting committee, or whoever decides, wants to buy. This state of affairs is likely to persist until publishers become more accountable for their products. They will become more accountable when the matters of control over classroom use and budget allocation are shifted more toward the publisher. These items I ask you to consider.

In California and some other states, there is a great interest in what is called learner verification. In essence, learner verification means that materials have been tried out during development and the results of the trying-out process have been incorporated into the final materials. It also means that materials put into classroom use are followed up by some organized process which enables revisions to take place in the light of intelligent feed-back. I know of no publisher who does not support learner verification in this context. Practically every new program of basic instructional materials is tried out in advance and the results of the try-outs are incorporated in the final version. Practically every program that is revised, is revised in light of feed-back from the users of the materials.

What is lacking is an organized and accepted process whose methodology is clearly understood and whose results are available in a form that is useful to everyone concerned. It seems like a simple process to take this next step and make learner verification the kind of process its advocates demand.

There are pitfalls. The validation or verification of materials cannot be accomplished without involving students, teachers, facilities, time allotments, and so forth. Once again, the issue of how much control over these items shall be given to the publisher is raised.

Any evaluation of the use of materials in the classroom cannot avoid the issue of evaluating the performance of the teacher. If an organized process of evaluating the success of materials is developed, it is an inevitable corollary that an organized process of evaluating the success -- or failure -- of the classroom teacher will concurrently be developed. That is a nettle that few have been willing to grasp. Do we wish to adopt a system of learner verification at this time? And if so, what must be done to protect the system from potential abuse? Learner verification is a two-edged sword. It can help to produce more effective instructional materials and methods. Or, it can be used to weed out teachers, materials, even students, who do not conform to standards set by some outside group.

Let me summarize. I have posed several questions that are related to accountability.

Is it appropriate to insist upon the verification or validation of instructional materials? If so, what conditions are necessary to prevent an unwise or unsuitable use of this concept or process?

Is it possible to make more money available for the purchase of instructional materials? Could we move toward the 5% standard set up by the NEA? If we did, where would the money come from?

Will schools ever share with publishers control over items such as pupil assignment, teacher assignment, time allocation, and so forth?

And finally, are educators responsible in any way for the behavior of their students in society? What responsibility should social studies educators, in particular, assume for producing citizens who will mold a society with no more My Lais, no more Watergates? And how does our answer to this question affect the agenda of our future concerns and activities in social studies education?

We are all accountable in the end. As members of society, as parents, as citizens, as well as educators, we each bear a share of the collective responsibility for the well-being of our community, our society, our world. The ultimate question is not who is accountable. It is only how shall you assume your personal share of accountability? Accountability cannot be a means of finding a scapegoat for society's ills. There are no scapegoats. We are all in this together. So let's try to work together to build a future that is more satisfactory and more human than our past and our present. Let us all accept accountability for that.